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Misconceptions about the Art of Ancient Publishing: Catullus' Book of Poetry Reconsidered

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Abstract: The poetry of the famous Roman poet Catullus (first century BC) has come down to us through a single manuscript. The question as to whether the order of the poems in this collection shows original composition of the poet has vexed scholars for over a hundred years. This paper will show that modern conceptions of publishing have anachronistically influenced the proposed solutions to this problem. After examination of the reactions of ancient readers to Catullus' poetry, it will become clear that no ancient reader of Catullus' poems has read the same "book". This urges us to reconsider our frame of reference in discussing ancient publishing.

Keywords: The Ancient Book, History of Publishing, Latin Poetry, Catullus

Introduction[1]

WHEN A BOOK is published, the text is fixed and can only be altered in a revised second edition, which replaces the previous version. This paper will focus on the publication of ancient, more specifically Roman, poetry books and will explore the extent to which these books, once published, can be said to be a fixed product like their modern counterparts. And if this is not possible, can we then even use modern concepts such as "publishing" and "books", or only with reservation?

As a case study, the poetry of the famous Roman love poet Catullus will be discussed. The reason for selecting this poet is that we have quite some external data concerning the circulation of his poetry in antiquity.[2] Another reason is that one issue, the so-called "Catullan question", dealing with the authorial arrangement of Catullus' poetry, has dominated scholarship on Catullus for over a hundred years, and it still does.[3] It will be shown that this question is based on an anachronistic preconception concerning what an ancient book is and what publishing in antiquity meant.

Catullus and his Poetry

First, however, I will briefly elaborate on Gaius Valerius Catullus, as his full name reads.[4] He probably lived from 84 to 54 BC, in the late Republican Rome of Julius Caesar (whom Catullus also attacks in his poetry) and the famous orator, lawyer, politician and philosopher Cicero, who is the most important source for our knowledge of the literary climate at the end of the Roman Republic. It is this Cicero who mentions a new poetical movement which became very much in vogue in this period. Cicero speaks with slight contempt about the representatives of this poetic avant-garde, whom he calls *poetae novi* ("new poets") and *neoteroi* ("youngsters") in Greek; accordingly, they are now usually referred to as the Neoterics. Unfortunately, except for the poetry of Catullus, we only have fragments of their poetry.[5] The Neoterics, who were influenced by Hellenistic Greek scholar-poets, wrote small, very learned poems, not about hackneyed, mythological and bombastic, epic subjects, but about new and lighter ones, such as love. Catullus' first poem in the collection which has come down to us clearly acknowledges his debt to Hellenistic poetics:

[1] I am grateful to Hugo Koning, Caroline Waerzeggers and the anonymous referees for their useful comments.
[2] See Wiseman (1985), 246-62 for "references to Catullus in ancient authors". See Butrica (2007), 15-24 for an assessment of these references.
[3] See Skinner (2007) for an overview.
[4] See e.g. Kolson Hurley (2004), 15-29 for an introduction to Catullus' life and poetry.
[5] See Hollis (2007), 11-86 for the fragments (with translation and commentary) of the poetry of Catullus' neoteric colleagues Cinna and Calvus.

cui dono lepidum novum libellum	Whom do I give a neat new booklet
arida modo pumice expolitum?	polished up lately with dry pumice?
Corneli, tibi; namque tu solebas	You, Cornelius; for you always
meas esse aliquid putare nugas	thought my trivia important,
iam tum, cum ausus es (unus Italorum)	even when you dared (the one Italian)
omne aeuum tribus explicare cartis –	unfold the whole past in three papyri –
doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis!	learned, by Jupiter, and laborious!
quare habe tibi quidquid hoc libelli	So take this mere booklet for what it's worth,
qualecumque; quod, patrona virgo	which may my Virgin patroness
plus uno maneat perenne saeclo.	keep fresh for more than one generation.[1]
Catullus, poem 1	

[1] The translation is by Lee (1990).

In this poem Catullus dedicates a poetry booklet to his fellow "Italian" (they both came from north of the river Po) and historian Cornelius Nepos, who wrote a history of Rome called *Chronica* in three *cartae*. This word is often translated as books, but a *carta* (or *charta*) is actually a roll of papyrus, the material that "books" were made of in classical antiquity until at least the second century AD. At that time the codex, in which one could turn pages (of parchment), like in our modern book, gradually came into use. So the form of an ancient book was a papyrus roll, "on one side of which the text was written in a series of columns. The reader would unroll it gradually, using one hand to hold the part that he had already seen, which was rolled up; but the result of this process was to reverse the coil, so that the whole book had to be unrolled again before the next reader could use it. The inconvenience of this book-form is obvious, especially when it is remembered that some rolls were more than ten metres long. Another disadvantage was that the material of which it was composed was by no means strong, and damage easily ensued."[7]

The qualifications Catullus applies to his own book are typical of the neoteric avant-garde discussed above. Catullus writes poetry on a small scale, as the format of this first, short poem reveals, but apparently this is also true on a larger level, for Catullus uses the word *libellus* ("little book") in the opening line. In the second line the poet says that this booklet has just been polished up, referring to the process of smoothing the ends of the physical papyrus, but also to the Hellenistic process of working laboriously on small but nevertheless learned poems, filled with allusions to earlier poetry and obscure myths. Despite the fact that Cornelius Nepos is not a poet but a historiographer, he is a very apt addressee, as is shown in line 7, where Catullus calls Nepos' work learned and laborious, thus recognizing his own Callimachean, neoteric poetical ideals in the work of his colleague. Moreover, the length of Nepos' history of Rome, three papyrus rolls, which (on average) contained between 700 and 1100 lines, could be regarded as in accordance with the neoteric ideal, especially when one compares it with, for instance, Livy's famous history of Rome, which was written on 142 papyrus rolls.

The *liber Catulli*

But what collection does this poem introduce? The poetry of Catullus has come down to us through a single witness, a manuscript called V for *Veronensis* (*codex*), which means "from Verona", Catullus' place of birth. There it was found in a monastery at the end of the 13th century, under a barrel, as legend has it. It is now lost, but fortunately we have copies.[8] This handwritten codex was the result of ages of copying the text by hand, and because we only have copies of V, it cannot come as a surprise that the text is very corrupt. Our collection of Catullus' poetry contains 116 poems with over two thousand lines, double the average amount of lines to be found on a papyrus roll, but of course a codex like V can contain much larger works than an ancient papyrus roll. One can imagine that research on Catullus has focussed on the following questions: is this is all of Catullus' poetry? Are these his collected works? And if so: does the order of the poems in the collection reflect original composition of the author? Did Catullus himself put the poems in the order in which we have them now? This question concerning the authorial arrangement of the collection that we have, also called the *liber Catulli* ("the book of Catullus"), is

[7] Reynolds & Wilson (1991), 2. This work is an excellent introduction to the field of books and scholarship from antiquity to the Renaissance. Another useful introduction, more specifically on "books and readers in the Roman world", is Kenney (1982).
[8] See Butrica (2007) for an introduction to "the history and transmission" of Catullus' text.

called *die Catullfrage*, "the Catullan question", as it was first posed in Germany in the 19th century, where the study of classics originated. The question has dominated scholarship on Catullus for over a hundred years, and it is still a major concern in this field.[9]

Initially the matter was decided on very subjective, esthetic grounds, allowing opposite positions to be defended with equal force.[10] Since then other factors were also taken into account. At some point it was deemed impossible that the entire *liber Catulli* could contain Catullus' collected works, as calculations proved that the book was too large to have fitted onto one papyrus roll in antiquity.[11] Recently, however, paleographical research has shown that a virtual Catullus papyrus of this size *is* possible, since there are ancient parallels.[12] But the book remains quite long, and Catullus does speak of a booklet in poem 1 and of "trivia" (*nugae*) in line 4, which is rather strange if it would refer to all the 116 poems in the collection represented by the *liber Catulli*. But because of the already mentioned parallels between Catullus and Nepos (they are from the same region, both write in a neoteric fashion), it has also been argued that when speaking of the three papyri containing Nepos' work, Catullus would be creating another parallel in that he could be alluding to the three papyri or books constituting his own collected poems.[13] There is something to be said for this, since the *liber Catulli* has a clear tripartite structure:

1) poems 1-60:	polymetric poems (mainly in hendecasyllables)
2a) poems 61-64:	longer poems with Greek models
3a) poems 65-116:	poems in elegiac meter
or	
2b) poems 61-68:	longer poems
3b) poems 69-116:	shorter elegiac poems / epigrams

The first 60 poems clearly constitute a separate part. They are written in all kinds of metres (mainly hendecasyllables) and are thus commonly referred to as the polymetric poems. The middle section consists of poems (61-4) that are much longer than the other poems in the corpus. The remaining poems (65-116) are written in elegiac distichs, the metre of the ancient epigram, and they are thus also referred to as the epigrams. The first poems of this third part (65-68), however, are quite long as well, and scholars take them (also on other grounds) to belong to the middle section of longer poems as well.[14]

That this three-volume structure represents Catullus' poetic oeuvre, with poem one as the introduction, is now *communis opinio*. But it is often forgotten that there are some serious problems with this theory. First of all, poem 1 still speaks about a "small book" (*libellus*), which it is obviously not. Another problem is that the collection we have, the *liber Catulli*, is not everything that Catullus has written. Pliny the Elder, for instance (1st cent. AD), refers to a Catullan poem on love spells, which we do not have,[15] and the commentator Servius (4th cent. AD) refers to a Catullan poem about wine, which is also unknown to us.[16]

So this is all very problematic, but, as Butrica has shown, a closer look at the often neglected ancient references to poems of Catullus that we *do* have gives us valuable information concerning the circulation

[9] See Skinner (2007) for this question and an overview of the various answers to it in different periods. My information is mainly derived from this article.

[10] Skinner (2007), 35 quotes the illustratively opposing opinions (in English translation) of Wilamowitz (1913): "He has arranged his poetry book with the most careful consideration; if someone can't see that, so much the worse for him" ("Sein Gedichtbuch hat er mit sorgsamster Überlegung geordnet (wer's nicht merkt, *tant pis pour lui*)") and Schmidt (1914): "No one can deny that the collection before us is a wild chaos" ("Niemand kann in Abrede stellen, dass die uns vorliegende Sammlung ein wüstes Chaos ist").

[11] Wheeler (1934), 16. See also Skinner (2007), 38 for a short assessment of Wheeler's argument.

[12] Skinner (2003), 187, n. 14.

[13] This has been suggested by Quinn (1972), 19.

[14] See Skinner (2007), 41 and 45-6 for these two possibilities.

[15] This is fragment 4 in the standard edition of Catullus' poems by Mynors (1958): *hinc Theocritus apud Graecos, Catulli apud nos proximeque Vergilii incantamentorum amatoria imitatio*, "and so Theocritus [*Idyll 2*] among the Greeks, Catullus [*?*] and quite recently Vergil [*Eclogue 8*] among ourselves, have represented love charms in their poems" (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.19; tr. Jones (1963)).

[16] This is fragment 5 in Mynors (1958). Servius comments on a line from Vergil's *Georgics* (2.95-6), *quo te carmine dicam | Raetica?* ("and you, Rhaetic [grape / wine] – how can I do you justice?"; tr. Fairclough & Goold (1999)): *hanc uvam Cato praecipue laudat in libris, quos scripsit ad filium ; contra Catullus eam vituperat et dicit nulli rei esse aptam, miraturque cur eam laudaverit Cato. sciens ergo utrumque Vergilius medium tenuit, dicens 'quo te carmine dicam Raetica* ("Cato praised this wine in particular in the books he wrote for his son; Catullus, on the other hand, dismisses it and says that it does not fit any occasion, and he does not understand why Cato praises it. Because he did not know either wine, Vergil kept middle ground, saying: 'and you, Rhaetic – how can I do you justice?'"; own translation).

of Catullus' poetry in antiquity.[17] To mention only a few examples: Seneca the Elder (c. 50 BC – 40 AD) refers to a poem of Catullus, poem 53 in our collection, which is written in hendecasyllables. Seneca says that the poem can be found *in Hendecasyllabis*, "in the *Hendecasyllables*" of Catullus.[18] As Butrica concludes: "This surely implies knowledge of a collection called *Catulli Hendecasyllabi* ["*Hendecasyllables* of Catullus"]: when something more specific than an author's name appears with an ancient citation, it identifies a work, not a meter." Quintilian (c. 96 AD) refers to poem 84 as an *epigramma*, an epigram;[19] in fact it *is* an epigram, a short poem in the elegiac metre, but because of the ancient citation convention just mentioned, a collection of Catullus' epigrams seems to be implied. On the other hand, Aulus Gellius (c. 150 AD) refers to poem 92, also an epigram, with the word *carmen* ("poem").[20] As Butrica remarks: "This must surely be a generic reference of some sort, since it would be otiose to observe that Catullus had written something *in a poem*".[21] The already mentioned Quintilian also refers to one of Catullus' longer poems in the middle section of our collection (62) with the title *Epithalamium* ("Wedding Song").[22] As Butrica comments, "this surely is evidence for the independent circulation of Catullus 62 under that title, since there is no parallel for citing a poem within a collection by a title".[23]

This material suggests that the three-part structure of our Catullan corpus may in some way reflect the way in which Catullus' work was published in antiquity. For there seems to have been a Catullan work called *Hendecasyllabi*, which may also have contained poems in other metres and thus recalls the first part of our collection, the polymetric poems. Furthermore, a collection of epigrams seems to have circulated, or maybe more than one, as we have two titles: *Epigrammata* and *Carmina*. The long poems in the middle (61-4), however, seem to have been known separately, and thus at least four more separate works of Catullus circulated in antiquity.

Because of this evidence and the fact that we certainly do not have all of Catullus' poetry, the question emerges again what kind of collection the *liber Catulli* is. I think we possess a large anthology, a popular phenomenon in antiquity. This anthology would reflect the kinds of poems (hendecasyllables, long poems and epigrams) – maybe not even *all* kinds – that Catullus wrote. The collection may go back to an ancient compiler, but it may also be the work of a later compiler who, when transposing several works of poetry of Catullus from papyrus rolls to a codex, put as many poems of Catullus in one codex as he could find, divided into three categories. This conclusion may be somewhat depressing, and the last decades scholars have worked from the assumption that Catullus wrote perfectly structured poetry books, in which the original poems have an independent meaning, but in which the sequence of poems also creates meaning. Accordingly, scholars are still trying to find shorter or longer sequences of original composition in the *liber Catulli*, traces of original arrangement by Catullus himself.[24] The fact that so many possibilities have been proposed already suggests that the whole affair is quite arbitrary and based on a modern conception of a book as a fixed entity, published at a certain point. In Rome, however, this kind of "publishing" did not exist. As Starr shows very clearly,[25] one could make a poem or several poems public by reciting them or sending copies to friends. These friends could then, in their turn, let their friends copy them, and so on. Publication, if we can use the word,[26] depended on a (probably very small) network of intellectual, aristocratic friends, who wrote literature themselves in their spare time; only after quite a while could strangers get access to the poetry.[27] Booksellers did exist, but, as Starr shows, they were not the main channel of distribution (at least in the time of Catullus).[28]

It is not difficult to imagine that this kind of "publication" made it very difficult for a collection of poems to stay fixed and for a poet to control the way in which his poems circulated as a collection.

[17] See Butrica (2007), 19-22, on which the following section is based.
[18] Seneca, *Controversiae* 7.4.7. See Butrica (2007), 20 for a similar example.
[19] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 1.5.20.
[20] Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 7.16.
[21] Butrica (2007), 20.
[22] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 9.3.16
[23] Butrica (2007), 19-20. He also mentions a ninth-century copy of poem 62, "which confirms the title by calling it *Epithalamium Catulli* [*"Wedding Song of Catullus"*]".
[24] See Skinner (2007) for examples.
[25] Starr (1987), on which what follows is based.
[26] Starr (1987), 215, n. 18: "The term 'publish' should not be used because it unavoidably bears a burden of modern implications". See n. 27 for Starr's own terminology.
[27] Starr (1987), 215: "In most cases, the sending of author's copies of a finished text meant the effective release of the work from the author's control. It then became possible for people unknown to the author to acquire a text by making a copy from a friend's copy. When strangers could acquire copies of the work, that work can be said to have been *made public* or to have been *released*. The release of a text involved only a decision by the author that other people could make their own copies. If no one wanted to make a copy, no copies would ever be made except by the author himself for presentation to his friends".
[28] See Starr (1987), 219-23 for the "Roman booktrade".

When a poet had recited one or more poems in public or had sent them to friends, they were "in the open", and friends could just copy the poems they liked. This fact combined with all the physical problems concerning papyrus rolls made anthologies very attractive.

A Parallel: Propertius' *Monobiblos*

A very interesting example of an anthology which also caused a long and enduring misconception, comparable to what happened to the "book" of Catullus, is that of the poetry of the Roman poet Sextus Propertius. He lived in Rome a generation after Catullus, under the patronage of emperor Augustus (c. 50-15 BC). Four books of love elegies of Propertius have come down to us, but the poet Martial (c. 40-105 AD), in a time when booksellers seem to have become more popular, mentions a *Monobiblos* of Propertius (14.189). This word is derived from Greek *monos* ("one") and *biblos* ("book"). In our medieval manuscripts of Propertius, the first book of elegies is often entitled *Monobiblos*, and Martial's remark has obviously been interpreted as meaning "first book".[29] Even today the first book of Propertius' elegies is called *Monobiblos* by scholars who think that it circulated "independently of the other books in antiquity".[30] It has now become clear, however, that Martial is referring to an *anthology* of Propertius' poems in one volume: a *monobiblos*. Pre- and misconceptions of what an ancient book is and what publication in antiquity meant have caused a misunderstanding of Propertius' poetry. Something similar seems to be the case with Catullus.

Conclusion: Catullus' Fluid Book(s)

Classical scholars have overemphasized the extent to which Catullus could control the circulation of his poetry. The poet may have circulated, for instance, all of his *Hendecasyllabi* in a fixed order, but considering the vague titles given to his poetry in antiquity, which were not fixed and could vary, as we have just seen,[31] and considering the way poetry was "published" in Rome, I see no reason a priori to assume an original fixed order. At any rate, this order would have faded very soon, for readers would have wanted their favourite poems of Catullus copied together on one papyrus roll, causing every Roman to have his or her own book of Catullus' poems. In a way, this situation may be compared with the modern practice of downloading individual tracks, which can cause the potential meaning of the arrangement of songs on an album to fade.

So when speaking about ancient poetry books, we should be careful in using the word "book", because of its anachronistic, fixed associations, and keep in mind how "fluid" ancient collections of Roman poetry could be. Despite the fact that this conclusion downplays Catullus' authority in the arrangement of his poetry, some consolation can be provided, for we may not know anymore to what collection of poems Catullus' first poem was the introduction, but probably fairly soon after this poem saw the light of day the Romans did not know it anymore either.[32]

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[29] See Heyworth (1995), 175-8 for a thorough discussion of the issue.

[30] Heyworth (1995), 175.

[31] Cf. Butrica (2007), 21: "Discussing his own light poetry in emulation of Catullus, Pliny the Younger reveals the diversity of titulature possible for such collections: 'The one thing that seems to need stating in advance is that I'm thinking of inscribing these trifles [*nugae*; *cf. Catullus' poem 1.4*] of mine *Hendecasyllabi*, a title limited by meter alone. So, if you prefer to call them *Epigrammata* or *Idyllia* or *Eclogae* or, as many do, *Poematia*, you may call them that; I offer only *Hendecasyllabi*' (*Ep*. 4.14.8)".

[32] See Hutchinson (2003) and Barchiesi (2005), 333-42 for sceptic views concerning the authorial arrangement of Catullus' poetry as a "perfect book" (mainly on poems 69-116).

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PhD student and teacher of Latin, Classics Department, Leiden University, The Netherlands. Mark Heerink is working on the PhD project Echoing Hylas: a metapoetical reading of the Hylas myth, in which the concept of the ancient poetry book plays an important role. He is preparing a booklet for the general public on the book and reading in classical antiquity.

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